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# HE Update – June 2017

## Teaching Excellence Framework Outcomes Next steps for Institutions and their Audit Committees

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### Background

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The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has been introduced by the Department for Education (DfE), supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Currently in its second year, the TEF is designed to recognise and reward excellent teaching. All participating providers were awarded overall Bronze, Silver and Gold ‘medals’ with the announcement of outcomes made by HEFCE on 14 June 2017. With some exceptions the majority of the established publicly-funded HE sector in England is participating.

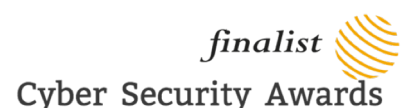
Plans are also underway to pilot in 2017-18 and 2018-19, and subsequently introduce, a subject-level TEF that will enable ‘medals’ to be awarded in relation to particular subject areas. In the longer term the DfE and HEFCE are exploring the possibility of new measures of ‘learning gain’ to be used as an alternative to the existing approach, however this area is complex and the subject of much debate over its feasibility.

In simple terms, the framework is an assessment of teaching quality by proxy rather than through direct observation of teaching as found in some other areas of education. The framework brings together a subset of existing relevant data sources (e.g. student satisfaction, employment and retention statistics), benchmarked in relation to relevant characteristics of the provider and their students. These are then used to provide analysis of the provider’s performance above or below expected benchmark in a number of different areas.

This centrally provided data was issued by HEFCE to all participating providers in late 2016. All providers also had to submit a narrative piece that provided further context and a mixture of qualitative and quantitative information about the approach the provider takes to supporting teaching excellence. Panels of expert assessors then assess the data and the narrative submissions together and award the medals.

Development of the TEF has been the cause of no small amount of controversy, particularly around the validity of the metrics used; overlap and crossover with HEFCE’s concurrent changes to the Quality Assessment regime; the proposed link of differential outcomes to differential increases in fees; and the suggestion that performance might be linked to a University’s ability to recruit international students.

The TEF has also been a key debating point in relation to the passing of the new Higher Education and Research Act. Final amendments to the Act conceded by the Government as it passed included committing to an independent review of the TEF in 2019 and the delay of the proposed linking of differential achievement in the framework to differential increases in tuition fees to after 2020.



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# So now you have a medal: what next?

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As the dust settles on the award of medals and whether the outcome was bronze, silver or gold, we offer the following three key actions that both Institutions and Audit Committees could consider taking to help ensure success in future exercises:

## 1. Use TEF benchmark data to focus investigations and internal audit work

The data provided by HEFCE has some well-known limitations. The questions that are used from the NSS are just one small sub-set of a survey designed for other purposes and with some questions over its suitability for making comparisons. The Destination of Leavers of Higher Education survey (DLHE) at present only provides information about employment six months after graduation.

Nevertheless, intelligent scrutiny of the benchmarked data provided by HEFCE can provide a steer as to where to focus deep-dive work by audit committees and their associated internal audit functions. Key questions are likely to include wanting to seek assurance that there is a good understanding of the causes of the areas below benchmark and that there are context-sensitive but specific and measurable plans in place to address them.

## 2. Beware the changing metrics

A number of the constituent metrics of the TEF are currently either under review or with plans in place to change in future. The National Student Survey will, from this year, include a new question within the metrics currently looked at in the TEF that relates to whether students find their courses challenging. There are also new questions around student voice that, whilst not currently part of TEF metrics, could potentially be so in future, and outside of TEF could impact negatively on league table performance. There are changes to employment data, and indeed future subject-level versions of the TEF have yet to have their metrics defined from the vast array of potential measures.

Assurances could therefore be sought on these forthcoming underlying changes and on that wider potential data that could feature in future iterations of the exercise; and in particular to check that there are plans in place to try and ensure performance is maximised in those areas.

## 3. Be subject-level ready: join up systems, processes, teams and reporting

Much has [already been written](#) on the challenges of the proposed move to subject-level assessment of teaching excellence. These include:

- challenges in defining and coding coherent subject classifications to enable meaningful comparisons;
- challenges in properly taking account of situational context in benchmarking in a way that can be understood by prospective students;
- challenges to the validity and usefulness of the underlying metrics once you get down to smaller sample sizes.

When so much is in a state of unknown a sensible risk mitigation strategy is to turn attention to the efficiency and effectiveness of underlying systems, processes and organisational structures for supporting, enhancing and monitoring improvements in learning and teaching at subject level.

Of particular importance will be:

- ensuring that institutions, both corporately and at a local subject level, are fully aware of what data they hold that is of relevance and where there may be gaps



- ensuring that that data is actively and systematically considered at subject level, and by those closest to the specific context of particular programmes and student cohorts, in order to ensure that all efforts are being made to enhance teaching provision
- ensuring that there are central assurance mechanisms in place to ensure actions are taken and to provide the basis for clear cross-institutional analysis, intervention and follow-up in subject areas where they may be concerns.

Any number of organisational structures and teams (e.g. learning and teaching enhancement units, professional development units, study support services) may already be in place to support enhancement of learning and teaching, depending on the size and scale of the institution concerned.

Whether these are centralised within one central function or associated with broader support functions it will be vital to ensure that all of these areas work together in one clearly defined framework with consistent objectives and reporting mechanisms that directly draw on the structure of the TEF to provide focus.

## How Uniac can Help

As the outcomes of TEF in its various iterations are implemented we can work alongside you to design, develop and assure efficient and effective systems that help prepare your institution and help improve your performance. We will work hard to understand the specific context and to develop straightforward, pragmatic recommendations informed by best practice.

With staff with direct experience of managing key related areas at national level such as the NSS, Learning and Teaching enhancement policies and projects and approaches to Quality Assessment, we are well placed to provided independent advice and assurance to help support your Institution's performance.



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